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Cinematic paradigms for hypertext

This essay combines film and hypertext theory to reformulate a hypertextual question that, to date, has been poorly framed. This question addresses the particular relation that may exist between the discursive domains of film and hypertext in terms of a possible affinity between the cinematic edit and the hypertextual link, with a view to reimagining the genealogy that has been imposed upon hypertext as a reading and writing practice. It is hoped that along the way a productive recasting of the relation between cinema theory (of one sort or another) and hypertext can occur, and that this will provide a possible methodology for a hypertext writing practice that is yet to be invented.

a history

The recent history of hypertext and its discussion of the moving image has produced a genealogy that has orientated itself around one of three major regimes: poststructural literary theories; post-digital celebrations of hypermedia 'promiscuity', and; post-digital appropriations of cinema into, or by, hypertext.

The first category is what could be characterised as 'canonical' hypertext theory, and is represented by the early work of people like Jay David Bolter (1991), Michael Joyce (1995), George Landow (1992) and Richard Lanham (1993). This work, while implicitly distancing hypertext from existing literary traditions, relies upon the insights, and appropriation of, various softened forms of poststructural philosophy (Derrida, Deleuze, de Man, Iser, et al) to illustrate the relationship of hypertext to print. However, this work, by defining itself in terms of a poststructural reappraisal of print (even in an apparently positive definition 'what poststructuralism suggests — hypertext performs') already casts hypertext under the surveillance, orbit or authority of the page and its particular discursive practice and traditions.

These 'early' theorists describe hypertext's relation to the image in two broad ways, the first is the manner in which digital writing allows our writing to adopt or express 'pictorial' qualities (for instance the use of colour and layout in HTML writing), and the second is the more ordinary use of images, where digitisation provides a *lingua franca* for otherwise discrete media types:

[T]he computer has the capacity to integrate word and image more subtly, to make text itself more graphic by representing its structure graphically to the writer and the reader. The computer can even dissolve the distinction between the standardized letter forms and symbols of the writer's own making. True electronic writing is not limited to verbal text: the writeable elements may be words, images, sounds, or even actions that the computer is directed to perform. (Bolter, 1991: 26.)

For these poststructural literary theories the ability to incorporate images into the space of a critical writing (for the examples proffered are always a critical writing — hardly any of this group of theorists seems to have thought that images might offer something to hypertext fiction), offers itself

as an opportunity to embellish and add 'depth' to otherwise monocultural textscapes. But it is also clear that for these first glimmerings of the image's relation to the hypertextual word there is an anxiety of the image in relation to the word. This is evident not only in the manner by which the image is relegated to the role of 'illustration', 'figure' or 'supplement' but in the much more specific way that hypertext theory attempts to prescribe rules of use.¹

The second category, those theorists who embrace hypertext's discursive or textual promiscuity, are represented by people like Greg Ulmer (1991, 1997), Mark Taylor and Esa Saarinen (1994), but also includes the direction indicated by the more recent work of Joyce (n.d.), Moulthrop (1998), and Amerika (n.d.), and most of the first group of writers where they discuss possible futures. While this is a surprisingly short list, an examination of the literature demonstrates that for most hypertext theorists and practitioners the ability and desire to link between and across documents is explicitly tied to text based domains.

While the relation of image to word in hypertext is a complex one, and generally under theorised, it is in the third category, what I'm characterising as the hypertextual 'appropriation' of cinema, that a possible hypertextual practice can be identified. Early work in this arena is best seen in John Tolva's 'MediaLoom' (1998), Nick Sawhney and David Balcom's 'HyperCafe' (1996), John Cayley's 'textMorphs' (n.d.) and the clearly evident interest in hypertext temporality evident at recent hypertext conferences (Shipman et al: 1998, Tochtermann et al: 1999). This 'cinematic' allure is also evident in recent work at Xerox PARC (Zellweger et al, 1998, Price et al, 1998) where the effort to animate the relation between hypertext nodes is simply reinventing a cinematic practice and procedure for traditional nodal relations in hypertext.

This recent work offers a major direction and set of possibilities for hypertext, but appears constrained by its difficulty in thinking or writing 'with' the cinematic in hypertext. Indeed, the literary bias within existing hypertext theory and practice operates as a prejudice, and here I mean 'prejudice' in the sense argued by hermeneutic philosophy (see, for instance, Gadamer, 1987), that is almost hegemonic in its efforts to reclaim the cinematic within the grammatical and literary fold. This hegemony is manifested in many ways, extending from the use of animated gifs on the Web through to the maintenance of existing broadcast models and televisual aesthetics for the presentation of audiovisual content in hypertext. This represents a literal reduction of the cinematic into a hypertextual domain that already accepts the linguistic and grammatical order of the word. Now, it is clear that hypertext theory is recognising this, and it is also clear that the now regular use of, for example, W.J.T. Mitchell's work on the relation between word and text (Mitchell, 1986, 1994), or the call to cinema already described, are hypertext's response not only to the 'assault' of HTML but also to theoretical impasses confronting hypertext. HTML and the web represent or perform a writing that is, at best, disinterested in the claims of hypertext theory (at least the sort of hypertext theory I'm describing here), and while hypertext theory can appear as merely reactionary in the face of the Web's colonisation of hypertext the move to questions of temporality and the image are a positive theoretical response to hypertext's Balkanisation by HTML.

one relation

However, I do not wish to criticise the colonisation of the cinematic by hypertext, but rather to alter the rules of engagement. Instead of attempting to think what cinema might offer hypertext, which already assumes a particular territorialisation of hypertext in terms of written discourse, I want to propose that hypertext has always been cinematic and that what I'm characterising as the "allure of the cinematic" evident in recent hypertext theory is merely the expression of an immanence that has always been present, though unrecognised. While Michael Joyce once, rather famously, commented that "hypertext is the word's revenge on TV" (Joyce, 1995: 47) I'd like to suggest that hypertext is in fact cinema's revenge on the word, and what I am interested in exploring is the word's remaking of itself in the light of the cinematic. This 'allure of the cinematic' as the expression of an always immanent cinematic force² probably takes various forms, however through the comparison of a particular cinematic moment or gesture — the edit — in the light of a particular hypertextual moment or gesture — the link, this force is given, in some manner, corporeal expression.

While there is considerable research in cinema studies regarding editing most of this has been subsumed under general categories of particular styles (Bordwell, 1985, 1997, Chatman, 1990). For instance in 'classical continuity cutting' the function of editing is defined in terms of a concealment of the constructed nature of film and narrative, and to present a seamless fusion of events, character, and movement. Of course there are many other styles of film making, and many other theoretical descriptions of these, but in general most of these descriptions treat editing as an integral process of construction (whether for the film maker, the film, or the reader) and are about the organisation of story, space, and represented event. Even where film theory or practice is explicitly dealing with the edit, for instance Russian montage cinema, one finds that while the emphasis falls on the 'leap' that the edit performs this edit is merely facilitating the expression of a transcendental condition. Interestingly this is probably not the case with Dziga Vertov's work, in particular his theory of the 'interval', and while many commentators have struggled to describe or contextualise Vertov's interval (often through rather forced modernist valorisations, for instance Petric, 1987), Deleuze's description of the interval in terms of a moment of indecision, or of possible decision, in the sensory motor schema of the action image has strong affinities with the hypertext link. (Deleuze, 1986: 39–40).

In a curiously analogous manner links in hypertext, and their theorisation, reveal a similar history. Early hypertext theory, for example Landow's seminal "The Rhetoric of Hypermedia" (Landow, 1994) concentrates on links as devices of connection where the emphasis falls on the intelligibility of the origin and destination of links but not on the links themselves. While being a node 'centric' description its effect is to 'erase' the work of the link, as in classical continuity editing — for Landow, the link is principally a mechanism that facilitates the movement between nodes. Similarly Slatin, in an exemplary early essay, emphasises the role of links as associative pathways. This argument relies upon a naturalising and psychologised zero degree of transparent intentionality where, once again, the link is subject to the content of its origin and destination, now doubled in the relation of link to node and of mind to writer. In more recent Web based hypertext practice much the same process is evident, here not only do links become dumbed down servants of already signposted commands (up, down, left, right, back, next, etc) but there is considerable investment — financial, aesthetic and theoretical — in the redundant nomination of link function through buttons, logos and textual cues, the graphical equivalent of the ubiquitous 'click here'.

What is common to theory's occlusion of the work performed by the edit in cinema, and the link in hypertext, is a two fold dilution of this interval into, on the one hand, merely a technique that facilitates connection, and on the other an active effort to conceal or disavow this connectivity into the material within the node or shot that is being connected. This allows narrative, event, or theme to appear to motivate this connectivity, and so produces classical modes of normative realism.³ The link or the edit is made subject to the representational content of the work, and while it is unclear whether there may be a 'realist' hypertext style analogous to classical film narrative redundant link legibility and the 'naturalised' graphical link could well be it.

In both domains the invisibility of this interval has produced a privileging of content spaces over their points of connection, but it is the possibility of there being connections that, in a rather banal way, makes each medium possible. In other words if we don't have links we don't have hypertext (certainly of the link node variety⁴) and this truism needs to be given due regard, as recent theory increasingly recognises:

To commemorate the third epoch of writing, the hypertext link will be made to carry its own signification, much as narrative has become its own kind of study today. So, in an attempt to add to that scholarly pursuit, I will propose the notion of a paratext, a dimension of signification that begins within text, but might systematically be shown to spawn its own narrative depictions. (Ricardo, 1998: 142).

Nodes without links are books, it is the presence of links that confers hypertextuality upon a discursive object, and while I am not willing to argue that the same can be said for the role of the edit in cinema (after all it is possible to have a cinema that consists of a single shot), the role of the camera in producing an enframed set does suggest strongly that the cinematic shot is formed by a simultaneous separation and insertion into a series of constricting and expanding sets (Deleuze, 1986: 12–28). Similarly in hypertext writing the possibility of the link offers itself as an open set, and while any particular link constrains this set, the link retains an aspect of this open set in its divisibility. This is one of the manners in which I would characterise the experience of hypertext linking, and this suggests that the intelligibility of the link and edit is an indirect problem, that is a cognitive or perceptual question, and it is the possibility of there being the possibility of a link or edit that needs accounting for.

Of course, in some ways, this is a caricature of film and hypertext theory, for there is considerable work that examines links and edits. However, this work can be characterised by its effort to present, or at least discover, a principle of classification that would allow links and edits to be described and catalogued. In cinema studies this work reached its zenith in the high structural work of Christian Metz (1974), and the more recent narratological work of someone like Seymour Chatman (1988, 1990), while in hypertext it is represented by work such as Burbules' "Rhetorics of the Web" (1997), Lanham's (1993) general rhetorical entreaty, and possibly even the research examining annotation practices being conducted by Xerox PARC (for example Marshall, 1998, and Price et al, 1998).

This general project appears to want to be able to produce or define typologies of link types prior to any particular hypertext analysis or readerly navigation, but like its cinematic equivalent its belief in the presence of a definable metastructure or system owes more to the reifications of structuralism

(or possibly late modernism) than to the pragmatics of link or edit use. It is clear that links and edits have rhetorical force, they do make connections between parts, they generate, demonstrate, even perform, arguments, and these do involve sets of relations between source, destination, and reading context. However, the point is not that they can be described prior to their appearance, but that they are the product of their conditions in practice, in other words they are what Deleuze and Guattari describe as an assemblage: ‘As long as linguistics confines itself to constants, whether syntactical, morphological, or phonological, it ties the statement to a signifier and enunciation to a subject and accordingly botches the assemblage’ (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987: 82). The problem, or question, is not what types of assemblage can be made, but what makes the assemblage possible. This is intended as a naïve question.

force

In cinema Lev Kuleshov demonstrated through a series of experiments that edits are able to compel associations or connections between previously unrelated material (Mitry, 1997: 100). The work of the edit appears to force this association, and while the meaning of the edit is external to the content of the shot its effect is to produce a hermeneutic logic that accounts for this relation as if it were internal. The same effect is present in hypertext, where we can, and do, freely connect between previously unrelated and disparate material, and by virtue of this connection the content is understood, in some manner, as now being related. This is not the ‘hit list’ we generate from a request to a Web search engine, nor is it the way in which we might more or less arbitrarily link to ‘external’ nodes, but is simply the capacity to link to nodes and in the link generate, *force*, a hermeneutically viable connection between otherwise discrete discursive spaces. This connection is not merely ‘technical’, nor rhetorical, but expresses a transformation between, and of, the nodes joined.

As Austin (1962) demonstrated, all utterances are performative and while they may vary in perlocutionary and illocutionary effect all discourse has performative force. The transformation of nodes and shots that is performed by their linking or editing is an expression of this force, and is not, at least in the first instance, the expression of a meaning, but is the transformation necessarily elicited by the force that all language, all utterance, is immersed within (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987; 75–9). The effect of this is what Deleuze and Guattari have described as an ‘incorporeal transformation’ where ‘[t]he order–words or assemblages of enunciation in a given society (in short, the illocutionary) designate this instantaneous relation between statements and the incorporeal transformations of noncorporeal attributes they express’ (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987, 81). This transformation ‘applies to bodies but is itself incorporeal, internal to enunciation’ (82) and furthermore is ‘recognizable by its instantaneousness, its immediacy, by the simultaneity of the statement expressing the transformation and the effect the transformation produces’ (81). In other words this is the realm of the order word, illocutionary force, and of indirect discourse, and this is the domain of the edit and link.

In cinema any two shots can be edited together, and in this editing a meaning generated or expressed — this is obviously a return to the ‘proofs’ of Kuleshov discussed above. Yet, any one of these shots can also be inserted into a different sequence, to in turn generate a different meaning. The content of the shot, its literal ‘body’, remains unchanged, however its attributes are

instantaneously transformed in the performance of the edit. In hypertext two or more nodes can be variously linked and the series they participate in, including the repetition of nodes, when the links are performed also effect instantaneous transformations of the nodes' attributes. As Walker has suggested:

The re-interpretation of the same node when it is re-read seems a perfect example of Nietzschean repetition. Not only does the node seem the same on the surface, it *is* the same more deeply than a traditional codex repetition can be. And yet it is different, changed (Walker, 1999:116).

What is crucial here is that this transformation is effected in and by the performance of the edit or the link, and not by the nodes (bodies) themselves, and that this transformation occurs with the performance of the link, it is coterminous with its expression.

The illocutionary force of such utterances has two aspects, it is what allows the apparently disparate or unrelated (two shots, two or more nodes) to be able to be joined, and it is what provides, even compels, the connection that we make between the nodes — this must relate to this. This force is prior to the sorts of connections, if you like the rhetorical tropes, that we are able to make, and in its expression edits, and links, become in fact 'risky' promises.

Promises, along with orders, are perhaps the canonical example of the performative. They are contextual, carry social, ideological, political, ethical, normative, and persuasive force, and are always conterminously determined or evaluated in and by their doing. What a performative utterance means is unable to be separated from its saying and doing, and their risk is not of being true or false, what Austin characterises as the constative, (after all what is an untrue link?) but of being felicitous or infelicitous. Indeed much of the work on hypertext linking, navigation, and readerly sense can be regarded as exploring what constitutes the good link (Bernstein, 1998a, 1998b, Landow, 1994). In other words, the leap and its recovery into a destination that a link or edit performs, represents an opportunity for misunderstanding, a loss of coherence, even simply a broken link, but this possible infelicity will always carry a residue of force that bets against this risk.

These incorporeal transformations are immanent to language but what is peculiar about cinema and hypertext is that as discursive systems they appear to want to give expression to, to make visible, this force. An edit or a link is, if you like, a manifestation of the expression of this immanent force, even a writing *with* this force, and while we might find it helpful to think about links as promises, and possibly even consider edits as promises, what is perhaps more productive is to attempt to identify how hypertext, as an already cinematic practice, renders this force visible. In cinema the dissolve has generally been surrendered to representation, however these are moments that give face to the edit, and dissolves are moments of particular intensity in film, points at which the performance of the edit is no longer surrendered to an impossible moment but given a duration that regularly exceeds the practicalities of narration. While the dissolve is a temporal device, its occupation of time by extending the usually occluded instant of the edit across the space and time of the image places the emphasis not so much on the promise, as on the act of promising. However, even more significantly dissolves are the invention of a rendering visible in film of its incorporeal transformations, as its performative force is made corporeal in the visibility that its folding upon

itself produces. In other words, during the dissolve the edit no longer is content or limited to an incorporeal transformation, but actually performs itself upon a surface, and in this renders its affects visible. It is less about meaning than about rendering the incorporeal or virtual visible.

Within most hypertext systems the distance between nodes is not a quality recognised (any node is as temporally available as any other), and in our dream of instant bandwidth every link ought to be as available as any other. This is of course much like continuity editing, but if hypertext writing and reading happens 'in' the link then it is not in the nodes that hypertext resides but in the connections and pathways made between nodes. To think about, describe, or even approach the question of what allows this requires us to shift our attention from nodes to links, away from a theoretical misreading that misjudges the content of a node as being that which allows parts to be joined. It is in this shift that cinema not only helps us by providing theoretical tools, but it is because hypertext is about the connecting of separations that we all find ourselves making our hypertext's cinematic.

The cinema rapidly defined for itself a method that expresses the effect of its force upon its own material form. This expression in time of the transformative work of the edit is, of course, probably unsurprising in a temporal medium, but the question of whether hypertext can or should pursue a similar trajectory is merely to begin to recognise those aspects of a hypertextual practice and theory that have been overlooked in its literary prejudices.

For hypertext as a writing practice the issue is not to mimic the cinema, but to develop a methodology that gives expression to the force that it is the expression of. This is a riskful writing, a writing that seeks, endorses, and returns to the expression of the force that the link embodies, performs, and promises. This risk is not to be found in subject matter, or content, but in a way saying to the danger of the link that endorses the break and recombination that links allow. This is how hypertext is cinematic before it is literary, and suggests that a future writing, the writing that hypertext is yet to be the expression of, will be a writing *with* the link. This is not the saturated linking that much experimental hypertext performs, nor is it the imitation of cinematic effects upon our computer screens. It would be, if it were possible, a 'zero degree' of the link, and while such a writing remains impossible it is the task of the hypertextual promise to move towards such a practice. In such a writing the link will have learnt to think itself, and we in turn will wonder at the obviousness of such a writing.

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1. See for example Landow's extensive rules around the use of images — in particular rules fourteen to seventeen — which don't appear to have to apply where only text is involved, (Landow, 1994). On the other hand imagemaps on the Web can be considered as demonstrating the ease with which the image can be appropriated by hypertext.

2. I'm happy to call this 'force' something other than cinematic, though I am suggesting that cinema and hypertext share this quality and/or expression. However, I would like to preserve the use of 'cinematic' in the interim, simply because the connotation of hypertext as a screen based practice I suspect is significant.

3. That is, realist narrative conventions in cinema, and categories of link association or description for hypertext. The latter is particularly evident in work that wishes to define linking from the point of view of an associative intentionality, so that the nature of a link should be, in some measure, transparent. This is evident in recent work on hypertext systems where an attempt to signal link type, or destinations, is attempted, for instance Zellweger et al., 1998 and Marshall 1998.

4. While this is a truism I would point out that it only applies to link node hypertext. Aarseth's "cybertext" and "ergodic" ought to be adopted to refer to other textual forms that may be considered 'hypertext' but are not link node in structure. (Aarseth, 1997)